Executive Summary

A charter school is an educational institution that gains significant autonomy to act as an independent entity in return for increased performance, often credited with the creation of a more competitive, entrepreneurial environment and greater responsiveness (Bierlein, 1997). The School of Education at the California State University at Los Angeles (CSULA) has established a charter relationship with the chancellor of the California State University System and the president of CSULA. At this time, it is the only higher education institution thus constituted. It is hoped that this experiment will allow higher education institutions to successfully address the issues of reform, responsiveness, and relevance that have troubled public higher education.

The focus of this study is twofold: the dynamics of organizational change and what the creation of the Charter School of Education entails and whether chartering a school within a state institution of higher education leads to increased responsiveness. To narrow the focus of this study, we look only at internal responsiveness, defining it as a faculty that is more engaged with their colleagues and their school than previously. However, our assumption is that an internally responsive faculty has a greater likelihood to create working relationships with external constituencies (external responsiveness). A responsive environment and increased student outcomes have been linked in the literature of K-12 charter schools (Wohlstetter & Griffin, 1997). This study explored whether chartering, as a method of higher education reform, leads to a more responsive organization.

We conducted 30 open-ended ethnographic interviews and observed various settings and meetings during the course of 12 months. The interviews followed detailed protocols, with questions decided beforehand, along with a consistent script that focused the dialogue on the issues of responsiveness, culture, accountability, and innovation. Given our interest in the change process, we concentrated our efforts on internal participants who played roles as change agents within the organization. We paid particular attention to individuals in leadership positions who were involved with the original chartering process, both in supporting the dean's decision to pursue chartering through the Office of the Chancellor and in creating, rethinking, and maintaining the subsequent governance structure of the Charter School of Education. At the same time, we interviewed people who were skeptical of the change process to gain as full a picture of the change efforts as possible.

In our interviews with faculty at the Charter School of Education, participants continually returned to three themes having to do with the idea of responsiveness and the dynamics of organizational change: 1) the challenge of creating and sustaining the climate for change; 2) the importance of professional collaboration in faculty lives; and
3) the excitement involved with being a part of an important progressive movement in education. The faculty with whom we spoke felt that the Charter School had created more work for faculty but that the nature of that work had changed as well. Although the sheer time and energy it took to govern and continually create and recreate the Charter School was frequently overwhelming to faculty, they often felt that, within the Charter School context, faculty work had become more meaningful and self-initiated. Pride and ownership of the School of Education and its mission was a common idea connected with this theme because faculty seemed to identify themselves more with the school than with their professions as professors of a particular educational specialty.

As a trait and an action, professional collaborativeness and collaboration were important themes in faculty work. As a partial proxy for responsiveness, collaboration was a core value of the Charter School of Education, although this form of responsiveness was primarily directed internally. The faculty spoke at length about responsiveness with other faculty in the School of Education, faculty elsewhere at CSULA, staff, and students, both through collaboration and opportunities for participation within school governance. Each participant also spoke of collaboration with external constituencies such as teachers, school districts, and community members in glowing terms, but this external collaboration was a much less universal experience. On the other hand, this collaborative environment raised tensions between the individualism of the mainstream university faculty career path and the communal reward system being developed at the local level within the Charter School.

Finally, faculty in the Charter School of Education had a sense that they and the work that they did were part of a progressive movement on the cutting edge of educational reform. This was universally expressed not only through pride and ownership in the Charter School's mission but also through performance in external credentialing bodies in excess of the minimum required standards. However, despite their self-image as leaders, faculty had trouble articulating to their colleagues outside the School of Education, particularly within CSULA, the exact relationship between the two institutions.

There is a troubling side to these changes, however. As collaboration and participation have become highly valued activities for faculty, there have been tensions between these new, communal values and the traditional individual-based criteria of faculty success. The definition of a successful or effective faculty member has become more openly contested ground. Likewise, as their work has changed in nature and increased in scope and intensity, the faculty of the Charter School have also undergone something of an identity change, as their identities as professors have been questioned, rethought, and recast. Perhaps the most troubling implication of this study was the contradictory relationship between the
Charter School of Education and the rest of CSULA, characterized by faculty as individually improved but institutionally poor. Those individual faculty that had an opportunity to collaborate with Charter School faculty were portrayed as enthusiastic supporters of their experience with the school. However, the relationship of the Charter School with the campus-wide committees in which the School of Education faculty still participated ranged from tense to hostile. Given that the larger university community at CSULA was part of the immediate community of the Charter School, the inability of the school to maintain a collaborative relationship with this important entity was a significant challenge that remains to be resolved.

It is tempting to focus exclusively on the structural changes to the Charter School of Education, especially because the most obvious real changes have taken place in that arena—approval of courses is smoother and quicker; faculty are rewarded in ways that previous rewards structures did not take into account; different constituencies make decisions that have budgetary implications. However, our analysis also underscores the important cultural shifts that have taken place in the Charter School of Education. People’s interpretation of the reality of the school is different from the past. Faculty perceive their work in a different way from what they have done. The Charter School of Education is a unique organization within higher education that is still shaping itself and defining its own mission and goals. The initial success of the reform ought not to suggest that every dean of education should begin to implement charters. Rather, the lesson to be learned here is how careful attention to the structure and culture of one’s organization can help create the conditions for meaningful change, which in turn can enable faculty to become more responsive.